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ABSTRACT

The use of questions in oral interpretation may offer a number of opportunities for moving forensics away from the performance paradigm. As competition in all interpretation events begins to sound the same, judges are left with only one criteria for judging--performance. While this may be considered an important criteria, it limits the educational emphasis of this activity. The benefits of questions are as follows. First, it seems that students, in the process of researching and choosing cuttings from interpretation, are more concerned about the ability of a piece to perform well than they are about its suitability to the context of the specific event. Second, as the cornerstone of forensics is argumentation, questions would be appropriate in forcing the participant to actively defend his or her choice for interpretation. Third, questions offer a judge additional criteria from which to make an evaluation. Questioning can become a way to reward competitors for creativity and in-depth interpretations. If there are some hazards in using questions--the amount of time they take up or the possibility that judges will raise their expectations unreasonably or otherwise misuse their opportunity to ask questions--the advantages still argue strongly for a change in the format at the Pi Kappa Delta national conference. (Contains nine references.) (TB)

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Questioning the Use of Questions in Interpretive Events

by

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Paper presented at the 1993 annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Miami, FL.

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According to McBath (1984) "Forensics is an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people" (p. 5). As we all know, forensics is also a competitive activity. I believe that the competitive aspect of this activity has begun to create problems for education in interpretation events. One way to bring education back to the forefront of competitive forensics is the activity of asking competitors questions.

The issue of using questions in competitive forensics is not a new one. This issue has been argued at conventions, national organization meetings, and tournament sites (Levasseur & Dean, 1989). Research indicates that students support its implementation (Mills and Pettus, forthcoming). This issue may be seen as a core issue of forensics as described by Logue and Shea (1990). They argue, research should focus on: forensics as an educational laboratory; the aim of the laboratory should be the improvement of student ability in areas such as research, analysis and oral communication; and the cornerstone of the forensics laboratory should be the argumentative perspective (p. 18).

The purpose of this panel is to consider questions in the forensics laboratory. I feel that we need to

move beyond a general discussion of questions to an examination of the specific context of interpretation events. To accomplish this task I will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using questions in interpretation events. Finally, I will make a plea for questions to be implemented at the Pi Kappa Delta national conference.

Advantages

The use of questions in oral interpretation may offer a number of opportunities for moving forensics away from the performance paradigm. As competition in all interpretation events begins to sound the same, judges are left with only one criteria for judging--performance. While this may be considered an important criteria, it limits the educational amphasis of this activity. The advantages of using questions in oral interpretation events may be based within the concept of moving away from a performance paradigm. These advantages may be considered in three areas. These areas are: improvement of argument in interpretation, educational enhancement of interpretation events, and additional criteria may be utilized in judging interpretation events.

Improvement of argument in interpretation

A concern of forensics educators, as discussed at the 1990 Developmental conference on Individual events, is the indistinguishability of interpretation event performances. The inability to distinguish between first person narrative poetry and prose cuttings forces a judge to move to a performance paradigm--those who perform best--win. The performance paradigm has been a factor in the blurring of interpretation events. It appears that in the process of researching and cutting selections for interpretation, students are more concerned with the ability of a piece to perform well than that it fits in the context of the specific event. Hershey (1987), argues that an argumentative perspective towards forensic competition is a better approach than the performance perspective. He claims this perspective "transcends practical versus aesthetic considerations in performance by inseparably linking them in the preparation, execution, and evaluation process" (p. 15). The use of questions provides the judge with the ability to ask student competitors questions which puts them in a position to argue for their text, performance, and interpretation of a selection.

The second advantage stems from McBath's (1984) contention that the cornerstone of the forensics laboratory should be the argumentative perspective.

McBath claims that this perspective "involves the study of reason given by people as a justification for acts, beliefs, attitudes and values" (p. 5). Koeppel and Morman (1991) agree with this perspective and argue that the introduction is the avenue to argue for literature, cutting or a program. Hershey (1986) considers that argument occurs in the p[erformance of a selection. He argues that the performance of literature, conceptualized as an act of literary criticism, may also function as argument. Hershey (1987), claims that the same argument applied to oral interpretation, argument may function as a framing device that allows for unbiased evaluation of interpretations of literary texts (13-14). When competitors answer questions about the choices they made they are actively involved in making an argument for their interpretation, cutting, characterization, and other issues of oral interpretation.

Educational enhancement of interpretation events

When judges ask questions in oral interpretation event, forensics becomes a more educational activity. The questioning judge is effectively involved in the Socratic teaching method. The use of questions offers two education advantages to oral interpretation events. Students will have to analyze their literature and be responsible for their interpretation.

Students will be expected to analyze prospective interpretation cuttings and come to an understanding of the material that is coherent enough to allow them to answer questions about it. This would help turn the trend toward generic, first person monologue, interpretation of literature. When students know that they will be asked to justify their cutting or interpretation of a selection, they may consider issues other than the performability of their selection.

The second educational advantage of using questions in interpretation events is that competitors must take responsibility for their interpretations of the literature, characterizations, and other interpretive activities. Students often indicate an inability to comprehend the difference between genres. This has led to the common complaint by judges, that they are unable to distinguish between the prose, poetry and/or drama in a Program Oral Interpretation cutting. The need to be able to answer questions about their performance of interpretation events may lead to a competitors deeper understanding of the distinctions in genres.

<u>Offers additional criteria for judging interpretation</u>

The analysis of this argument offers an advantage to judges. The quality of a competitors argument may serve as an additional criteria for judging

interpretation events. Often lay judges are told to go into an interpretation round and judge according to what sounds best to them--this ambiguous basis for raking often confuses judges and ultimately feeds into the performance paradigm.

Glauner (1992) offers three criteria for judging interpretation events: relevancy, significance, and depth of insight. This criteria may be used to as a springboard for question to ask students in defense of their performance. Additionally, the questioning period becomes a way to reward competitors for creativity in cutting, in-depth interpretations, and/or exceptional justification for their interpretation of the material or a character.

Finally, the use of questions is advantageous because their use makes the judge a more active participant in the round. Students often complain that they have no understanding of a judges beliefs beyond their nonverbal feedback (Hanson, 1988). Hanson found that students have a number of concerns about judges ballots creating confusion. Students felt that comments on ballots: were too general; were inconsistent with rank and rate; were insincere, untruthful, and unhelpful; and that judges reacted to the selection and not the performance (p. 17). Questions would provide an outlet for students to

interact with the judge and would allow students to understand the judges concerns more clearly.

Disadvantages

The use of questions in oral interpretation events provides a number of advantages, however we must also consider the problems involved in implementing their use. Three disadvantages need to be considered: the element of time, the expectations of the judge, and the misuse of questions.

The use of questions in interpretation rounds will demand a time commitment in an activity that already demands a great deal from its participants. Discussion needs to occur about how much time should be used for questions for each contestant, how this will effect the tournament schedule, and whether all competitors should be asked questions.

Second, the expectations of forensics judges will increase in terms of not only time, but also in their degree of knowledge about the activity and each event. Conceivably, a lay judge may not know what to ask a contestant in interpretation events. This may also be a problem for former competitors who specialized in public address and limited preparation events.

Finally, forensics is an activity where judgement is subjective. The use of questions makes the activity even more subjective than before by offering the judge

the opportunity to have additional criteria for their decision. Often competitors read their ballots and complain that the judge "does not understand my characterization," or "does not understand my cutting." While these concerns could be alleviated through the use of questions in the round, other problems may arise. Concievably, lay judges may ask questions which may indicate a lack of knowledge about the events, a bias toward certain competitors or types of literature, or may ask only some of the competitors questions.

Professional in collegiate forensics often consider themselves to be forensic educators. We should remember that our focus should be to educate students and reward those who have become exemplary in our laboratory. Forensics is not a sport, those who are exceptional performers should be expected to continue to learn in this educational activity. The use of questions in oral interpretation events can move us beyond teh performance paradigm, involve students in a more argumentative perspective, allow judges to clarify concerns about cuttings, and ultimately facilitate the learning process of forensics.

The use of questions offers a number of opportunities for the evolution of interpretation events. Mills and Pettus (forthcoming) found that

students would like to see the use of questions in all events and at both invitational and national tournaments. Because using questions makes interpretation an argumentation centered event, increases educational opportunities, creates additional judging criteria, and students want questions at local and national tournaments, I feel that Pi Kappa Delta should institute its use at their national conference.

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